

Reflections Healing of Memories - Sénégal Team 2024

Inès MINGOU

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Collective reflection

As a group, we identified two major themes: **mental health and social injustice**. In our discussions, we explored different aspects of these issues in the context of our personal lives and Senegalese society as a whole. Both themes represent **old and new wounds**. We see a continuum, an evolution and a persistence of these issues, even if they may take on different angles and aspects over time.

1. Mental health

- Break-ups
- Divorce
- Bereavement
- Loneliness
- Society's taboo on mental health
- Being able to confide in others

We agreed that the different experiences we have had as individuals, whether family breakdowns, sudden deaths, divorces, betrayals or times when we have felt lonely, isolated and depressed, have all had an impact on our mental health. These can be old or new wounds. Old wounds from our childhood and adolescence can affect us in our lives today. Events experienced by our parents or other family members in the past can also affect us today.

We discussed the tendency in Senegalese society not to share feelings, as it is difficult to find people you can trust, even among apparently close friends. People often share personal and confidential details with others, so individuals carry a lot inside them. People are taught not to show their emotions and not to talk too much about how they feel. People often feel uncomfortable with other people's displays of emotion.

Men, in particular, are socially conditioned to be the 'strong' pillars of society, who have to be there to hold things together when things fall apart. From an early age, boys are told they must not cry and, as adults, society demands that they do not show strong emotions when they feel overwhelmed.

Women are expected to "muñ", to submit to or accept whatever comes their way, particularly in the context of married life. Tolerating the intolerable is valued by

society, and women are seen as good wives.

Psychiatric services are limited and expensive. Often, people suffering from mental illness are regarded as 'crazy' and, if they can afford it, are admitted to a psychiatric clinic. However, we noted the many other mental health problems that people may face in their daily lives, whether due to socio-economic pressures or emotional problems, which remain unrecognised and taboo, and people are expected to cope on their own.

2. Social injustice

- Slavery and colonialism and their continuing impact
- Its place in a multicultural society
- Gender roles and stereotypes
- The issue of talibés

As far as social injustice is concerned, we discussed many topics, some of which are older wounds, such as the impact of slavery, which is linked to other more recent wounds created by the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism. A situation that still persists and has left its mark on the psychological development of society. The case of "Khessal" skin lightening, which many women practice despite the risks of illnesses such as cancer, because they are convinced - and the idea is still fairly widespread in society - that a person with light skin is better because they are "closer to white people".

We also discussed some of the privileges of being a Westerner in Senegal and the discomfort of living with present injustices (for example, the ease of travelling with a European passport compared to a Senegalese one).

There are examples of social injustice prevalent in today's society in relation to the unequal roles of men and women and patriarchal laws that perpetuate the dominant position of men (for example, only a father can recognise and register a newborn child, if this is not done, the child and mother may be considered outcasts and not allowed to go to school).

We also noted injustices in terms of religious exploitation in the form of "talibés" begging, particularly on the streets of Dakar, in the name of spiritual education.

All these issues led us to ask ourselves what our position should be in facing this social injustice. In other words, how we try to find a balance between compassion for this situation and not developing a sense of guilt that can have a psychological impact on us.

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TESTIMONIAL 1

The question of belonging is very important to me. I grew up in Louga and, at the age of 11, I went to school on the island of Gorée, Mariama Ba. Although I always felt close to my six sisters and my brother, I had the impression that they were all so brilliant that I needed my own space and my own place to shine. I was always a high achiever, like the rest of my family, and I was always an independent thinker. My mother encouraged us to study and have opinions (so much so that today she jokes that she encouraged us too much because we're so outspoken!) My father also encouraged me and my sisters to have and express our opinions, to be free thinkers. Sometimes they encourage me to work for an international organisation or become a civil servant, but most of the time they just give me the space to be who I am. At school, when I was a teenager, I followed my own path, which can be difficult and isolating, because people don't always understand what you do or why you do things differently. I felt even more isolated when I went to study at Sciences Po in France, an elitist and very white environment where I found the company of other people like me from different countries.

I identify with and am very proud to be a Senegalese woman and a black woman. However, I feel very isolated because of gender norms in Senegal. Often, because I don't conform to Senegalese societal norms regarding a woman's appearance, dress and behaviour, as well as the work she has to do (if any), people even ask me if I'm Senegalese, which I find very disturbing. I accept other people and their life choices, which may be different from my own, but I get a lot of misunderstandings from people about my own choices, such as the career path I've chosen. I choose the freedom to be who I am and to express it, but I feel very isolated in this process. I get very angry when I see women in my family and others around me who are trapped in roles defined by society and who want to break out of them but can't. Even if they conform to the rules, they don't have the freedom to do so. Even if they conform to socially accepted gender norms, they too are isolated in their own way.

Sometimes I feel so angry at men and society. Misogyny is so prevalent in all areas of society, including the organisations I work with. The system in place favours men, limits women in their career progression and doesn't value the nurturing role that women play in the workplace, which is neither paid nor recognised, and which can even be detrimental to their performance in other areas and used against them to limit their career progression. I think men are very aware of the power dynamic and will always use it to their advantage, whether in the romantic or professional world. Even if men admit in private that the system is unfair, in the public sector they continue to reinforce the dominant norms that undermine women. This indecent and inhumane behaviour must be denounced.

In my organisation, I really enjoy working with women and breaking down the myth that women have to compete with each other to fulfil their potential. In my experience, I find a lot of comfort and support from my sisters, my friends and my

colleagues, and I want to pass on this example of female support to others. However, I sometimes have the impression that individual changes are not enough, that it's the whole structure of society that needs to change. I believe that that will happen one day, that everything will implode. There is a growing feminist movement here in Senegal. But I also fear that once it takes shape and women step out of the place assigned to them by society, they will be punished for it and will have to face greater and greater isolation. I try to support my own feeling of isolation and stability by seeking support from those around me, particularly my family, by asking important questions and by reading a lot on subjects that interest me, from sociology to patriarchy. As hard as it is to do, I've given up the need to be a career woman and made peace with that. Instead, I prioritise spending time with the people who are important to me.

TESTIMONIAL 2

As for your question, "What impact have the wounds of the distant or recent past had on me socially or psychologically? My account, which is fairly short in the end, may relate to repeated incidents of racism that I experienced in France in different situations: at school as a teacher, on public transport, in 'loving' relationships at the time... The first impact, which we often want to deny, is a feeling of humiliation that leads to intense anger and even hatred. We are denied for what we are, not for what we do. The feeling of powerlessness comes from a simple fact: you can change what you do, you can do things differently, but you can't change what you are. So the racism I experienced seemed to me like absolute violence, like a crime that doesn't speak its name. That was my first reaction. Then I tried to answer two questions: why? Why were these people racist? And then to find out how to eradicate racism.

For the first question, which enabled me to go beyond the problem of no longer being a victim but a spectator of a condition that some Westerners have, I came up with an answer that makes me see them as ignorant victims of fear, erroneous education, learned lies and, above all, an inferiority complex, which means that racism is unconsciously a system of defence and attack. What's more, since it works in one direction only, as long as they have the force of arms in the world and in all the structures on which our so-called modern societies are built, there's no reason for them to stop. With this in mind, I obviously asked myself whether I could be racist myself, or whether black people were racist... I obviously think that conditions are needed for such behaviour to take place; it's not written into the DNA of Westerners, but is encouraged by a situation...

To the question of how to eliminate racism?

Having understood that it is a situation that encourages and perpetuates racism and that all nations placed in this historical situation can become racist, I said to myself this: eradicating racism from the minds of the people and nations of the West, whose system is based on this attitude that responds to their fears, is a long task because

you have to attack the causes and remove them. In the same way, it is up to them to do so if they are aware of it and feel the need to do so. Instead, I turned to another question: what can I do to stop experiencing racism? That's when I asked myself "Why do I suffer racism? What makes racism possible for me? I realised that not accepting who you are, submitting to the West in every possible way - linguistically, politically, culinarily, dress-wise, intellectually, artistically, aesthetically? was a way of legitimising the racist's sense of acceptance of our inferiority and superiority. Not accepting that you are black is a serious mistake that will perpetuate racism for as long as it lasts. Secondly, racism is only possible when the racist belongs to the group that is strong and the racised belongs to the group that is weak. Strength can be numbers, weapons, money... Getting out of situations where I belonged to the weaker group, the minority group, for example, meant that I chose to leave France and return home to Africa. That doesn't eliminate all the factors that can lead to racism, but it does remove one important pillar... Because you have to fight so that the racialised African group has money and a real army.

To keep my answer short, I'll say that this trauma had an impact on my relationships with Westerners, it's true, but above all it prompted me to do some serious existential reflection that led to my understanding of world geopolitics and to start taking action, not by making noise, but by acting on the causes of vulnerability of the victims of racism. If we cannot remove racism from the head of the racist, we must work so that those who suffer racism no longer suffer it and so that racism becomes useless, ridiculous and even harmful to the racist himself. To make the racised invulnerable. This is also why I talk to young girls, for example, who bleach their skin or spend a fortune on wigs with straight Western hair, to tell them that they are unconsciously cultivating the factors that make them vulnerable to racism, and by these acts they are proclaiming that they belong to an inferior race that can only be looked down upon by copying, by resembling the white people.

Anyway... I could go on.

The impact has been social and intellectual: no hatred today, but a deep reflection, a real introduction to geopolitics, to the analysis of relationships between groups, between nations and between races in the world. I obviously want to make naïve young Africans aware of the thoughtlessness with which they commit acts that keep them in the shackles of this racism that once justified slavery, was reinforced by slavery but could one day legitimise slavery again. Those who believe that this is no longer possible are simply unaware. We need to reconsider the three factors I mentioned: numbers, if not money, if not lethal weapons, and if possible all three.

TESTIMONIAL 2

Q1: When people talk to you about mental health, what do you understand by that?

For me, mental health is the fact of being well in one's head, that doesn't mean not

having any problems or anything like that but just being well in one's head. Even if there are problems or difficulties, we have to know that this is our life and we can move forward.

Q2: And how do you feel about your health in general and your mental health?

I think I'm on the edge of a cliff, a breeze could blow me over. These days I sometimes wake up at night and cry and cry and cry until the morning. And it's not that I'm crying because of a particular situation, it's just that I'm at my wits' end. I've been through so much in my life and I'm still going through it, but I don't even have the strength to deal with it any more. I suffered a trauma when I was a teenager and since then I feel like I haven't been able to move forward. When I get into trouble, I feel like I'm back to that helpless little girl and everything I've been through comes back.

Q3: How do your family and friends support you in general?

With them I don't talk about it any more, they're always saying "oh, she's always got these psychological problems that she thinks are more important than other people's problems". Even with friends I don't talk about it any more, practically I don't talk about it any more because the people I confided in to explain what happened to me and what happened in my family, they have broken my trust. They told several people around them and explained the distress I was in and some people used that to hurt me. At the time, I was in such distress that I thought about dying. My biggest disappointment was realising that the people who were supposed to be supporting me were the ones who were pushing me under, holding my head and my whole body under water. I tell myself today that I can no longer trust anyone and I prefer to be alone and cry, because even if it sounds strange, crying does me a lot of good. But at least I'm carrying my burden alone and there's no risk of anyone coming to denigrate me. You see, I'm Gabonese but now I don't easily leave the country unless there's a real emergency. Because at least here in Dakar I have peace. It's not easy, it's difficult in everyday life and psychologically I know it's not really that but the peace I have here is incredible. It's hard to say and explain, and maybe it's even mean of me to say this, but I have more peace away from my family than when I'm next to them. With them, I'm suffocating, I can't talk, because as I told you, as soon as I try to explain something when it's not going well, they're always making some kind of rant and it's hard for me to put up with that.

Q4: I'm going to give you a list of words and you tell me what they mean to you in terms of mental health: Break-up, Divorce, Mourning, Loneliness, Taboo.

I've never been married but I've had relationships that ended very badly and I still think about it, but I'm trying to move on from that.

I think bereavement is something that affects us all in some way. When you lose someone you were close to, it always affects you, but everyone deals with it

differently. On the other hand, solitude and taboo are two words that really speak to me a lot because that's what I experience on a daily basis. The taboo of not being able to talk about what's happening to me with the people around me. It becomes like a crime to tell my family that. I'm not well, maybe I'm even crazy, because someone once told me that this is how madness starts. So I keep quiet, I keep quiet, I pile on, I pile on and when things don't go well I just cry and cry some more. I think maybe that's the only thing that keeps me going, because otherwise I don't know where I'd be. Maybe in a psychiatric hospital. As for loneliness, there are two aspects to it, in fact it's an aspect that evolved. It used to really upset me not to have anyone to confide in, I felt really bad because of that, alone and really isolated, and that had an effect on me. It's as if my brain had developed a mechanism that took on these aspects and told me you see, you're useless, nobody wants to be there, nobody wants to listen to you because you're not important. And it's like an infernal cycle because the more you're not right in your head, the more your mind tells you these kinds of things and when you get close to people they make you feel bad, eventually your mind tells you see I was right and so you do this loop alone in your head. But the other aspect, as I was saying, is that today things have evolved, I no longer have this loop of solitude because being alone gives me peace. I don't force myself to go out and meet people, I'm alone and I'm at peace, it's not the best thing but at least it's OK. And since I've accepted that, I no longer have this infernal loop that demoralises me or anything else.

Q5: And if you had to talk about changing things, what would your message be?

I think it would be to listen. But really within the family, that's the most important thing. Because there are certain things that you can't explain outside or to anyone or even if you do, they won't understand. That's why I think it's so important to be listened to, to talk within the family.